

## Black Country Centres Study

### Summary

#### Purpose of the Study

The Black Country Centres Study has been produced by consultants Lambert Smith Hampton (LSH) to help inform both plan-making and development management decisions across the four Black Country local authority areas. The findings of the Study will specifically provide the robust evidence base required to inform sound and deliverable Black Country Plan (BCP) and Tier-Two Plan (e.g. Area Action Plan/ Site Allocation Document) policies, particularly for shopping – comparison (non-food) retail and convenience (food) retail, office and commercial and leisure development, along with contributing to a policy framework for other supporting centre uses, such as residential.

The Study comprises:

- *Black Country Centres Study, March 2020* (4 Volumes: Main Report, Healthchecks, Quantitative Modelling and Household Survey Results). This Study was commissioned in March 2019 prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and finalised during early 2020
- *Black Country Centres Study Update, August 2021* (3 Volumes: Main Report, Healthchecks and Quantitative Modelling). This Study was commissioned to update the key findings of the 2020 Centres Study in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the BCP timetable being adjusted and the plan period running to 2039, and changes to the planning system (such as to the use-class order and permitted development rights)

#### Scope of the Study

What the Study does	What the Study does not do
<p><i>The Black Country Centres Study, March 2020:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through a Household Survey in the defined Study Area, the study provides the most up-to-date and robust evidence on shopping patterns, leisure preferences and expenditure flows within it, which informs the ‘health-check’ assessments for centres, as well as the quantitative (‘capacity’) and qualitative need assessments and analysis for retail (convenience and comparison goods) and leisure uses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide advice on the allocation of specific sites for centre-uses</li> </ul>

What the Study does	What the Study does not do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reviews the national and local planning policy context relating to retail and town centres, and highlights key trends and implications for the Black Country</li> <li>• undertakes health-checks for the Black Country’s Tier-One (Strategic) Centres, and Tier-Two Centres (Town Centres, including Walsall’s District Centres). An overview and analysis of a sample of Tier-Three Centres (Walsall’s Local Centres, and District &amp; Local Centres within the other Black Country Authorities’ areas) is also provided</li> <li>• provides an assessment of the office market</li> <li>• details policy implications relating to the Black Country Core Strategy (2011) centres policies</li> <li>• provides key findings for each Black Country local authority and provides policy advice</li> </ul> <p><i>The Black Country Centres Study Update, August 2021:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• highlights current trends that are driving the dynamic changes in the retail and leisure sectors and centres, including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and implications of recent changes to the planning system (such as to the use-class order and permitted development rights)</li> <li>• provides a health-check update for the Strategic Centres (Wolverhampton City Centre, Brierley Hill, West Bromwich and Walsall Town Centre)</li> <li>• updates the capacity modelling and analysis for retail and leisure uses</li> <li>• provides an update to the office market assessment</li> <li>• provides key findings and policy advice</li> </ul>	

## Key Findings of the Study

- Both the 2020 Study and 2021 Update confirm there is little quantitative capacity over the plan period to support new retail and leisure floorspace
- The office market is likely to be predominantly demand-led and the Covid-19 pandemic, with the increase of home working, has implications for the future nature of office provision, which is more likely to come forward as part of mixed use schemes
- The Black Country's centres perform a crucial role in serving the needs of the Black Country. As with other centres in the UK, they are facing challenges, such as the level of vacancies resulting from changing shopping patterns, which has been brought into focus by the Covid-19 pandemic, and moving forward there is the opportunity to repurpose and diversify centres
- Recent changes to the planning system (such as to the use-class order and permitted development rights) have introduced further flexibility that will encourage an increased mix of uses, particularly residential

## Implications for the Black Country Plan

- Given the lack of quantitative capacity it is not appropriate for the BCP to have formal strategic targets for centre-uses. The BCP should support the regeneration of centres through encouraging a diverse mix of uses, including new housing development, and through qualitative considerations aimed at enhancing the sustainability and environment of centres
- The BCP should also have robust policies which protect centres from significant adverse impacts, particularly the sequential test and by having locally set thresholds to undertake the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) impact tests for edge and out-of-centre retail and leisure proposals
- The Black Country Core Strategy Policy CEN3 'preconditions' relating to Merry Hill are no longer fit for purpose and should be replaced by a policy approach that promotes sustainability and the management of car parking demand within the Black Country's Strategic Centres
- Future development in the Black Country (particularly residential and employment) should be served by the existing network of centres to help ensure their vitality and viability
- The structure and content of the three-tier hierarchy and network of centres is endorsed
- The BCP can be supported by regeneration strategies and schemes, and the preparation of local authority Tier-Two Plans (such as Area Action Plans and Site Allocation Documents) to address centres related issues, for example, helping to facilitate office growth such as by adopting a 'reservoir' policy approach, and providing any centre-use site allocations, site allocations in Strategic Centres, adjustments to centre boundaries and the designation of new local centres (where there are clusters of existing centre-use provision in the current urban area to serve existing and future communities)